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SUBJECT: USG QUAKE ASSISTANCE CAN HELP BUILD GOODWILL IN J&K

REF: A. NEW DELHI 8122

1B. NEW DELHI 7990

11. (SBU) Summary: The October 8 earthquake that carved a path of destruction through Kashmir continues to claim lives as the death toll continues to rise. A USAID/OFDA team completed a rapid assessment in J&K (Ref A) and reports more extensive damage and a slower humanitarian assistance response to outlying villages than local press coverage has conveyed. The situation on the ground offers a unique opportunity for a swift and appropriate USG response to this crisis that can help alleviate suffering and generate goodwill among the people of J&K, many of whom continue to harbor suspicion about the US. Septel USAID/OFDA cable will include a detailed technical assessment of what will most benefit the Indian earthquake victims and how it can best be provided; the purpose of this cable is to flag the intangible benefits of USG assistance, (including possible military-to-military activities) toward achieving political, public diplomacy, and development goals in J&K provided that we act quickly to meet demand while the door remains open to us. End Summary.

Saving Lives

12. (U) The earthquake is almost two weeks past, but numerous opportunities remain to save lives. Many Indian Kashmiris are suffering from the onset of winter, s first snows, and exposure is a risk for many who lack permanent shelter, warm clothing, heating equipment and fuel. Furthermore, although we do not yet see reports of widespread disease, camp-dwelling populations will be at risk of any fast-moving outbreak. Many villagers living in remote hamlets have reportedly still not received any relief. The Indian Army is the most effective aid team the GOI has to offer in J&K, and they service more than a dozen villages a day. Indian media have reported unusually positive Kashmiri comments on the Army's relief role. However, the Army will be unable to provide sufficient and appropriate long-term shelter and supplies to the entire affected population of approximately 200,000 before winter snows hamper operations, beginning in three to five weeks.

Gaining Goodwill

13. (U) Swift and effective USG aid will help offset negative local opinions of America. Some of our Kashmiri contacts, as well as journalists already critical of Washington, have unfavorably (and unfairly) contrasted our disaster assistance to J&K with the aid earmarked for Pakistan, where admittedly the human toll and monetary losses are exponentially higher. As our Kashmiri contacts point out, J&K is one of the few strife-torn areas in the Muslim world where the US is generally welcomed and US policy enjoys broad support. A rapid USG response, to regions where GOI assistance has yet to reach many of the injured and displaced Kashmiris, will go a long way toward further winning the hearts and minds of Kashmiris, who are already disenchanted with 16 years of militancy (Ref B). They are an audience waiting to be convinced. Coupled with a substantial expansion of NGO program assistance we can make significant inroads with this very visible and vocal segment of India,s Muslim population.

14. (U) Urgent needs include winterized tents, shelter and building supplies, blankets, medical care, warm clothing, and psychological-social counseling. (NOTE: The National Disaster Management Authority, the nodal agency coordinating earthquake relief, informed us that the J&K government would not submit a request for tents, saying "they have it all under control." End Note.) In addition, due to the mountainous terrain, the damaged infrastructure, and the continuing tremors, transportation of supplies and services is a major constraint.

15. (SBU) To date, \$600,000 in U.S. assistance from OFDA has been provided to India for earthquake relief. USAID is proposing additional grants to NGOs working in the area, also through OFDA. Additional U.S. Government support, especially

to NGOs established on the ground in J&K, would help meet the urgent needs of affected communities and would demonstrate U.S. commitment and solidarity with those impacted by the earthquake.

16. (SBU) Another avenue we are exploring informally is military-military assistance. Given the positive reaction (in J&K and more widely through positive press reporting in India) to the Indian Army's rescue work, there may be a role for PACOM under the umbrella of our recently launched disaster assistance initiative. Unlike our assistance to NGOs, we will need to receive an official request from the GOI for all mil-mil assistance.

Security Concerns Not Insurmountable

17. (U) Terrorism is not uniformly distributed in J&K. For example, the Kupwara area is a well-used terrorist infiltration route into J&K from Pakistani Kashmir, and therefore the site of terrorist attacks and confrontation with Indian security forces. In contrast, Uri, which lies on the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad cross-LoC bus route, is a far more secure town. Because of this, the Indian Army has been able to invest in local projects in Uri, including schools, and is viewed more positively by the local residents than in some other districts, which also makes Uri less attractive as a base from which terrorists can operate. Security in J&K is a concern, and assistance will have to be coordinated with J&K police, but this is one operational element to be considered, and not insurmountable.

Comment: Time is of the Essence

18. (U) Snows are already blocking some roads, and transportation problems will only worsen as winter sets in and aftershocks continue to make overland travel risky, costly, and time-consuming. The window of opportunity to save lives and be seen to be doing so is closing within the next few weeks. The U.S. Mission in India urges the strongest possible Department support for OFDA recommendations for increased, immediate USG assistance.
BLAKE